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Lake levels down, and going lower

In a month, St. Clair drops by 2 inches, Erie by 4

July 28, 2001

BY DAN SHINE

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The recent hot and dry weather has accelerated the seasonal drop of lakes St. Clair and Erie and may cause more water from the lakes to evaporate come fall.

This month -- with only 0.32 inches of rain so far -- is about to go into the record books as the driest July on record. As a result, Lake St. Clair has fallen 2 inches the past four weeks and Lake Erie 4 inches. Both lakes are expected to drop an additional 6 inches by late September. Factors on which the forecast is based include winter snowpack and precipitation throughout the summer. "Any gains we made with our wet spring seems to be disappearing," said Adam Fox, physical scientist in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Great Lakes hydraulics and hydrology branch.

Fox said lakes Superior, Michigan and Huron have fared better. Rainfall in the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin have kept levels on those lakes fairly steady, though he said Lake Michigan has dipped 1 to 2 inches recently.

"This dry weather and the heat have given the lakes a nudge to start their downward trend earlier than usual," Fox said.

There appears to be little help on the horizon. A

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forecast for the first part of August calls for temperatures in the upper 80s and low 90s with little rain.

"If we go into that hot-and-dry, hot-and-dry, hot-and-dry mode for August, obviously there's no help there," Fox said. "Then we'll have to start watching lake temperatures into September. If the water warms up and cool air masses move across the lakes in September, like they typically do, then that's a maximum evaporation situation."

Lakes can lose 1 to 2 inches of water a week due to evaporation during fall and winter, when the water is much warmer than the air moving across the lakes.

Fox said boaters should be aware of the dropping lake levels. Just because there was enough water in the spring to launch a boat doesn't mean there will be enough in the fall.

John Reynolds, 37, of Macomb Township, who trailers his boat to various Macomb County ramps, said it's not been too bad.

"I haven't seen people getting into trouble out there, so I think people are getting used to the lower levels and know they have to be careful out there," he said.

Contact **DAN SHINE** at 313-223-4554 or dshine@freepress.com.

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